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Waller W. Young, Jr.

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THE FARMERS' SLANT ON FARM LABOR*

The majority of the farmers in most parts of the Nation are opposed to action which would restrict the nonfarm employment opportunities of farmers' sons and farm laborers. They do not want minimum farm wages, and subsidies for farm wages are generally feared. Farmers nearly everywhere prefer the local type of labor with which they are familiar, but when the traditional labor supply dwindles other types of labor have usually been found satisfactory. Practically all farmers approve of the military deferment of farm workers, want a limitation on industrial wages, and desire higher prices for agricultural products.

FREEZING OF FARM LABOR GENERALLY OPPOSED

The farmers' opposition to the freezing of farm labor grows out of basic farmer-laborer principles. Most frequently mentioned was the conviction that a worker is not a good or dependable worker unless he wants to remain in farm work. The farmers' search for "hands who have an interest in the farm" is grounded on experience: "You can't force a man to stay on a farm. If you do, he won't be much good."

The nature of most farming enterprises is such that the hired worker must work with a minimum of supervision, complete one task and turn to another without direction. In many farm tasks, such as milking,

*The base materials for this statement are taken from the detailed reports of 34 of the counties in which observations are being made by the field staff of the Division of Farm Population and Rural Welfare for the project on Rural Life Trends in Wartime.

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it is difficult to detect inefficiency at the time. But the results of such indifferent work are cumulative and may sharply reduce the farm income.

Another frequent reason for farmers opposing the freezing of farm labor is that most farmers sincerely believe that a man should be permitted "to better himself." This attitude was most frequently expressed in such words as, "It would be wrong to keep a man from bettering himself," or "It isn't fair to freeze boys on farms." This attitude should not be surprising, for many of the farmers' sons have left the parental farm shorthanded to take a war job, and many farmers themselves have made or are considering similar moves. But this attitude does not spring purely from selfish motives. Only an occasional farmer recommended more severe restrictions on labor movement for nonfamily members. Freedom to choose one's employment is a deeply ingrained value of American farmers.

FREEZING OF FARM LABOR SOMETIMES ADVOCATED

While this may be said to reflect the dominant attitude of farmers, there were some exceptions in which sentiment leans strongly in favor of freezing labor on the farm.

In Tennessee the Farm Labor Committee of the State War Board prepared a statement strongly recommending the virtual tying of farm workers to the land, though the farm labor situation is not critical in that State to nearly the degree that it is in many others where the farmers strongly opposed labor freezing.

The recent farm survey by the American Institute of Public Opinion shows that 7 percent of all farmers and 9 percent of southern farmers

advocated the freezing of farm jobs to keep laborers from going into factory employment.

Conditions in areas where farmers were most favorable to the idea of freezing labor seem to be characterized by:

1. A large local labor supply which has been chronically unemployed or underemployed, lives at a subsistence level, could be drawn on at will, and paid wages set by the employer because they had no alternative employment opportunities.
2. A wide gap in social status between employers and workers rationalized through the years by the employer group in terms of lack of ambition and general low status of the workers.
3. The introduction of alternative employment opportunities that decrease the labor reserve, shift some bargaining power to the workers, raise their level of living, and generally threaten the traditional social structure of the community.

MINIMUM FARM WAGES NOT WANTED

In most areas, the farmers are opposed to minimum farm wage laws. In the areas of low wage rates (the subsistence areas and the Cotton South), they object because they fear that any minimum wage rate that might be established would be higher than those now being paid. In these areas, the fact that the farmers viewed a minimum wage as a maximum wage was indicated by the almost universal comment that a minimum wage would not take into consideration the individual differences in ability. "Come," they say, "would be worth more and some less than any minimum wage that might be set."

In the areas where farm wages range from \$60 to \$100 per month and perquisites for year-'round labor, and \$4 to \$6 per day for day labor, the employers feel that a minimum wage would be of no value in holding the present workers or regaining those lost. There is also an almost universal fear that any minimum wage law would also control hours, and farmers are practically unanimous in their opinion that farm work cannot be adjusted to a rigid hourly schedule.

In discussing governmental action in the wage problem, whether it revolved around minimum wages or wage subsidy, the farmers in all areas indicated strong opposition to government intervention. They generally express opposition to government control of any kind, and especially fear wage control. Such control is associated with the past policy of the Work Projects Administration, which in many areas paid workers at rates well above the customary farm wages. The farmers insist that WPA wages, together with the short hours, "spoiled" the workers for farm labor.

WAGE SUBSIDIES - FEARED BY SOME, DESIRED BY OTHERS

With notable exceptions, farmers are generally opposed to government wage subsidies to make up the difference between wages farmers can pay and those workers can get in war industry or construction. Farmers in the areas now paying the higher wages maintain that consumers can afford to pay the full cost of agricultural products, and that prices should be high enough to permit them to pay the farm wages necessary to hold labor on the farm. Many of them also fear that government wage subsidies will mean control of hours and other farm practices which they do not want controlled.

In the areas where farm wages have been low due to a large group of underemployed low-status workers, the employers object to the subsidy for the same reason that they object to any minimum standard of wages, i.e., a raise in wages for that group will disorganize the present social structure of the community. In areas of traditional surpluses of farm labor and of low incomes, employers of farm labor are opposed to any program which will materially raise farm wages. In many places in those areas, wages as low as 15 cents an hour are common, and 25 cents an hour is still thought of as high in many places. ✓

In areas of commercial cash crops such as fruit and truck which depend on nonresident migratory workers during the peak labor seasons, wage subsidies by the Government were most often approved. In these areas, the laborers leave when the work is completed, and so a raise in their wages is not a threat to the social system of the local community.

DEFERMENT OF FARM WORKERS GENERALLY APPROVED

While farmers are generally pleased with the current deferment of farm workers, many farmers say it came too late to help because needed workers had already been taken. This attitude is very prevalent in the Range areas. Others question its fairness to the boys. Many have said, "It doesn't seem fair to the boys to be 'favored' by the draft." In many areas, farm boys will not ask for deferment and request their parents and employers not to ask it. The general public seems reluctant to accept farm work as the equivalent to military service in importance, and it is widely believed that the general lack of appreciation of the value to the Nation of the farm worker has caused numerous farm boys to enlist

early in the war, and is now making many of them unwilling to seek legitimate deferment.

In the Cotton South and the subsistence areas where farm labor is most plentiful, many farmers insist that the administration of the act is too severe. Sixteen war units, and even eight, are considered too high a requirement for deferment. Some seem to feel that practically all farmers should be deferred, even though many of them produce little more than they consume. The farmers in the family type commercial farm areas believe they can get along if their teen-age sons are deferred. The deferment, they say, should not be on the basis of the war units produced on the home farm alone, for these boys are assets to the entire neighborhood since they work for neighbors nearly as much as for their fathers. The farmers point out that these teen-age boys are skilled farm workers, and are worth more than untrained men who are not interested in farm work.

TRADITIONAL TYPES OF FARM LABOR PREFERRED

Farmers everywhere express preference for the types of labor they are accustomed to having. Mexicans, Japanese, and "Okies" are wanted in the Far West, Mexicans and Spanish-Americans in the Southwest, Negroes and native-born Whites in the Southeast, European immigrants and local rural dwellers (and in recent years an increasing number of southern Negroes) in the Northeast, the sons of neighboring farmers and now and then a family from the Kentucky hills (and some Mexicans on beet farms) in the North Central States, the sons of neighboring farmers or families from the Cut-over or from Ozarkia in the Midwest.

Japanese laborers are prized in areas where they have been used for years, unwanted nearly everywhere else; farmers accustomed to Mexican labor feel imposed upon if expected to use Negro workers, and vice versa; some beet farmers are comfortable only when they have Mexicans working in their fields, others would be irritated by even the suggestion that they use Mexicans, and on through the whole listing of America's diverse farm labor supply.

The farmers' preference for the familiar types of labor applies to their use of the various age and sex groups in the unusual types of labor now being used in some areas. The readiness, for example, with which women and children are used in the fields is closely related to the traditional practices of the area, while employed townspeople and urban students are most readily available and usable in areas where there are fewest ethnic differences in the population and where economic and social lines are least severe. Women and children of the upper-income groups, employed townspeople, and urban students are least available for farm work and last to be used in communities where race and class differences are most marked.

NEW TYPES OF FARM LABOR PROVE USABLE

When the preferred types of laborers are no longer available in sufficient numbers, farmers have utilized new types of labor. Negroes have been used where Mexicans were preferred, Mexicans where Japanese were preferred, urban students where rural students were preferred, and on through the various categories of the unusual farm labor supply.

In those parts of the Nation where farm labor is scarcest and is highest paid, all kinds of unusual farm labor are already being used - employed townspeople, urban students, elderly men, and imported labor from within and without the Nation.

And it is of importance to note that most of the farmers who turned to new sources of labor when the traditional supply was no longer available, are finding the new workers more satisfactory than they expected. Farmers who, two years ago, knew they could never use urban high school students, reported last fall - after having used them for the first time - that they "caught on" more readily than they had expected and "toughened up" more quickly than they thought they would.

Many of the above observations are closely paralleled by the findings in a recent BAE report for "Administrative Use" on, "Farmers' Attitudes Toward Various Types of Farm Laborers."

CHANGES IN FARM LABOR SPEEDED UP BY WAR

Throughout the Nation's history, changes have been taking place in the farm labor pattern. The tightened manpower situation occasioned by the current war is speeding up the rate and quality of these changes.

Farm labor changes came with the expansion of the frontier, the importation of African slaves, the purchase of the Louisiana Territory, the annexation of the Southwest, the influx of immigrants from northern Europe and later from southern Europe, the coming of Orientals to the Pacific Coast area, the invention of the reaping machine and the binder, the development of urban industry, the coming of the automobile and the farm tractor, the refrigerated car and truck.

The very fact that the farmers, region by region, nearly always prefer local labor would suggest that the farmers anywhere in the Nation could make satisfactory use of any type of labor available to them. Georgia farmers accustomed to Negro labor and New England farmers accustomed to southern European field hands moved to the Pacific Coast and came to prefer Japanese, Mexicans, or transient "Okies." The war further demonstrates that when traditional farm laborers are not available, effective use can be made of the local unusual labor supply and of labor from outside the region - in this respect the experience of the employing farmers is very similar to that of other employers.

Farm wages have been and are of basic importance in this shifting mosaic of the American farm labor pattern, for perhaps more than any other one item, the pay received by the worker suggests his status in the community where he works.

FARMERS' COMPLAINTS FROM AREAS OF TRADITIONAL OVEREMPLOYMENT

In general, complaints of high wages are most common in the areas where the lowest rates prevail and where labor has been most abundant, that is, in the subsistence and Cotton South areas. The January farm survey by the American Institute of Public Opinion shows 55 percent of the farmers throughout the Nation and 61 percent of those in the South were finding it difficult to get the help needed. This same report showed 27 percent of the Nation's farmers as compared with 47 percent of the southern farmers paying farm labor under \$2.00 a day.

Probably an important reason for the southern farmers' greater complaints about labor shortage is that there is more visible unemployed

or underemployed labor there, and the employers resent any rise in wages when there is not an actual scarcity of workers, and when it has long been assumed that harmonious relations could be maintained between the various economic and social groups in the local community only by the perpetuation of existing economic and social differences. Farm employers in these low farm wage areas complain bitterly about the "no accounts" who are getting high wages in war construction and industry, and are making all the local workers dissatisfied with prevailing wages and hours. In these areas, farm wages are still below the pre-war national average.

In the higher farm wage areas (as also in the low wage areas), the farmers consider wages now paid quite fair in relation to farm prices but they point out that "fairness" is quite irrelevant to the problem so long as workers can get a higher wage in industry or construction. In general, the farm workers seem to agree that the farmers are paying "fair" wages in relationship to what they get for their produce, but not comparable with those of nonfarm employment.

The wages of urban industry and construction often reduce the farm labor force in the low farm wage areas by a number greater than that represented by those who leave the farm, or commute from the farm to non-farm work. The low wages traditionally paid farm workers in these low wage areas have virtually forced the entire family to work. Industry's higher wage relieves the members of the workers' families of the economic necessity for working. Thus, some women and children who formerly worked on farms are no longer in the farm labor market. This has been especially noticeable among some of the city dwelling foreign-born peoples of the Northeast, and among families of the poorer rural Whites and Negroes of

the lower South. Some of the women and children from these families have gone into better paid jobs, but others have been glad enough to enjoy for the first time in their lives the higher social status that has always been attached to those families in these areas whose women and children did not have to work away from home to help support the family.

REGULATION OF INDUSTRIAL WAGES DESIRED

Discussions of farm wages often brought out the farmer's belief that industrial wages are too high, and that the farmer is suffering from competition with industry for labor. Statements like these were common: "It isn't that agricultural wages are too low, but wages in war industries and construction are too high." "Any minimum wage agriculture could pay would be too low for anyone who can get a war job." "You can't blame a man for getting 'some gravy' from a war job." "That we need is not a floor under farm wages but a ceiling to industrial wages."

Many farmers believe that the Government has been too lenient toward union labor, and that the Government has backed labor leaders in their demand for what the farmers consider exorbitant industrial wages. Connected with this - in the farmer's mind - is the common belief that industrial employers do not care how high wages go because they are operating on a "cost-plus basis," and "so the higher wages go, the higher the profits." These beliefs are bolstered with stories, especially common in defense construction areas, of wasteful use of both labor and materials. Such factors as these, the farmers point out, give industry an advantage which makes it impossible for agriculture to compete for labor.

Many farmers say the Government discriminates against them by letting industry set the price and profits for their products on the basis of wage costs, while opposing the inclusion of farm labor costs in the farm parity formula and refusing to let farm prices rise. A most common response to the question of minimum wages or government subsidies is, "Give us the prices for our farm produce, and we will take care of the wages."

Similar findings are reported in the January farm survey of the American Institute of Public Opinion, which shows that 72 percent of the farmers thought the Government had favored urban labor, and by a recent BAE study for "Administrative Use" which states that farmers feel "higher prices for their products would enable them to meet industrial competition for workers."

